

Is the Tory Party Leadership Contest a new version of the Rocky Horror Picture Show?

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If you have never seen The Rocky Horror Picture Show at the theatre, I'd urge you to do so if you want a fun-filled evening. The original stage show, written by British writer Richard O'Brien, premiered at the Royal Court Theatre on 19 June 1973 and is a musical lampoon to the genres of the science fiction and B movie horrors of the American period from the 1930s through to the 1960s.

The reason for referring to this show is, apart from the fact that it commenced in 1973, the year the UK joined the EEC (European Economic Community), it involves a plot about a couple, Brad Majors and Janet Weiss, whose car breaks down near Denton in Texas, knock on the door of a nearby castle, owned by Dr. Frank N. Furter, to ask to use the telephone. What they encounter in the castle, aside from Dr. Frank N. Furter being a transvestite from outer space who's creating muscle man in his laboratory, are an array of other outlandish and strange characters who you'd never expect to encounter in normal life.

Politics, and especially Westminster, is a strange place at the best of times. Let's face it, the design of the building has a somewhat gothic feel due to the involvement of Augustus Welby Pugin, a young 23 year old Catholic architect dedicated to this style, who had been hired for £400 by the winner of the competition, Charles Barry, to redesign the palace in 1835 following the fire that had ravaged it the previous year.

Similar to the castle in which Brad and Janet encounter a number of weird characters, if you have the 'pleasure' of visiting Parliament you will happenstance on a number of equally peculiar characters, Members of Parliament, whose role is, we are regularly informed, is to represent their constituents' interests. It is worth stressing that the

word peculiar is used, in equal measure, as both critique and in endearment.

Being an effective MP requires a level of dedication to be selected in the first place, in a great many constituencies winning sufficient votes to be elected and, normally long hours and hard work in dealing with local issues whilst considering matters of national importance. To want to be an MP is not an ambition that motivates the vast majority of people. Indeed, there is a good shout that the vanity that is needed suggests that a significant proportion of those who represent us have personalities that verge on narcissism.

If becoming an elected MP can be something of a challenge, achieving the position of Prime Minister of the UK is, for the vast majority of those who get to Parliament, regarded as simply impossible. Only a very select number of MPs ever even get a sniff of being able to occupy number 10 Downing Street. Normally, only individuals with an extremely high degree of self-confidence and brio are willing to even be considered.

The contest to replace Theresa May, whose career was effectively dashed on the rocks that are Brexit, means we are left with a list of ten candidates who, given some of uncanny and bizarre claims as to how they would solve the Brexit conundrum, would probably not be considered too out of place in Dr. Frank N. Furter's castle. If Brexit is ever turned into a comic opera based on characters displaying varying forms of irrational thinking, the contest to become PM will provide an act in its own right.

Some three years on from the June 2016 EU referendum, the objective of resolution feels as far away as ever. There are just under five months to the 31st October deadline for departure set by the EU back in April as a 'final' extension to the Article 50 process triggered in March 2017. The question remains, who is going to be elected leader of the Conservative Party and, of course, immediately becoming PM to replace Theresa May?

Undoubtedly the most crucial factor of selecting May's successor is their stance on how the result of the 2016 referendum can be implemented by the UK leaving the EU. Some, claim that unless the EU is prepared to renegotiate the terms contained in the withdrawal

agreement that was so painstakingly negotiated by May, the only option then should be by a 'clean' exit by what is a 'no-deal'.

What this contest demonstrates starkly, is that whoever takes over will inherit the same (rocky) horror show that Theresa May has been grappling with for the last two years and, because of her passionate defence of the withdrawal deal, was forced to step down prematurely. And as Theresa May will no doubt confirm in her inevitable insider account of her involvement of negotiations with her own party, a significant swathe of her party are precisely the sort of diehard Eurosceptics who made life so difficult for former PM John Major in the early 1990s when he was attempting to gain Parliamentary support for the UK to sign up to the so called 'Maastricht Treaty' in 1993.

The Maastricht treaty, creating the constitutional basis for the European Union, was detested by many within the Conservative Party who saw it as a slippery slope to increasing subjugation by bureaucrats in Brussels and loss of sovereignty. That Major eventually achieved the objective of ratification by Parliament was no mean feat and surfaced the sort of bloodletting that refused to disappear and returned with vengeance under David Cameron.

All of the leadership contenders are only too aware that Eurosceptic MPs will not want to repeat what they probably see as the mistake of the party selecting Theresa May, a 'remainer', as leader following Cameron's resignation immediately after the referendum result. Rather, it is believed, they want a 'full-blooded' Brexiteer who has no qualms about going back to the EU and demanding better terms for departure, most particularly on the matter of the Northern Irish 'backstop that they see as undermining the continuance of the union.

Hence among some of those aiming to replace May, we're seeing proclamations of how 'hard' they are willing to be in terms of the UK's departure from the EU. Andrea Leadsom and Boris Johnson, both of whom who ran against May when she ran in 2016, are, like Dominic Raab and Ether Mcvey, happy to have a hard Brexit.

Indeed, as Raab stated last week, he appears quite comfortable at the possibility of proroguing (ending the current session) Parliament if it meant that it stopped MPs preventing a 'no-deal' Brexit; one of the

very few things that Parliament has achieved agreement on in recent months.

Speaking at the launch of her leadership bid, Andrea Leadsom reinforced her belief that Parliament could “not stop us leaving” and that her wish is to achieve a “managed exit”. Others disagree that a ‘no-deal’ is not an option we should contemplate because of the economic damage that it would do to the economy.

Though predictions of economic calamity are eschewed as being a continuance of so called ‘Project Fear’, data published on Monday by the Office for National Statistics provides evidence that the economy shrank by 0.4% in April because of the shutdowns imposed by car makers in the lead-up to the 29th March deadline. Continuing uncertainty is killing business it appears.

As is pointed out by many commentators, this uncertainty will continue, at least, for the next five months to the next deadline of 31st October. As Jonty Bloom, the BBC’s business correspondent stated on its website, business should companies plan for this; “Repeat the whole operation again or not bother? Certainly the car industry won’t want another shutdown, it has already had one this year and Brexit could still be delayed again”

Notwithstanding the matter of Brexit there have also been some pretty incredible tax promises made by some of the candidates; most especially Boris Johnson’s claim that he’s use money that is set aside to deal with a ‘no-deal’ to raise the 40% tax rate threshold to £80,000.

There is little doubt that Johnson is cognisant of the two-stage process of becoming leader of his party. The first stage of selection is being gaining sufficient support among the 312 Conservative MPs who though a process of whittling down, will select two candidates to be considered by the estimated 160,000 members.

Significantly, these members, representing approximately 0.25% of the population, are predominantly white, largely middle class, consisting of more males than females and average age 57. For such people, the prospect of paying reduced tax is attractive. They are certainly not the sort of people likely to lose employment in the local car factory or within suppliers who may close in the event of a ‘no-

deal' that advocates suggest offers such tremendous opportunities for the UK's economy.

Fascinatingly, it is over a quarter of a century since the favourite candidate to take over as leader of the Conservative Party. Though Boris is undisputedly odds on to win, as Brexit demonstrates, we should not rule out the unexpected.

Boris's past behaviour is not without reproach and it is notable that his campaign is consciously based on him not being subject to scrutiny by appearing in public or interview by the media. Contrast this with the way in which Rory Stewart, the stand-out candidate has conducted himself.

Stewart's admission of having smoked opium whilst in Iran has only made him seem even more endearing. It has to be said that if he were to emerge as winner – a very long shot – it would be a surprise of monumental proportions.

Former leader of the Liberal Democrats, Nick Clegg, speaking at a Times CEO summit believes that the chances of the next leader of the Conservatives being a 'hard' Brexteer have increased when he claimed that, "I think the chances of a no-deal outcome have accelerated because the Conservative party, as they always do, have put their own survival ahead of the survival of the union of the United Kingdom"

If Tory party members were able to get beyond their myopia and, among a sizeable number, detestation of Europe, they might see him as someone who would be popular among a broad spectrum of the electorate; Lord Adonis acknowledged that he would offer a genuine treat to Labour.

Amusingly, and with resonance to Tory leadership contenders being like characters seen in the Rocky Horror Picture Show, the Daily Mirror's 'Fleet Street Fox' columnist suggests that they are like the "worst movie villains" and the question is which anti-Avenger will "destroy us all":

"It can be only a matter of time before the Conservative Party disaster movie gets the Hollywood treatment. It has drugs, dirty tricks, a

vengeful Lorraine Kelly and an entire cast of psychopaths that the audience would love to see picked off in a series of cruelly inventive murders.”

Accordingly, ‘Fleet Street Fox’ asserts that Matt Hancock is Agent Smith, Michael Gove is Emperor Palpatine, Boris Johnson is Beetlejuice, Dominic Raab is Stripe, Jeremy Hunt is Norman Bates, Rory Stewart is Maleficent, Andrea Leadsom is Nurse Ratched and Esther McVey is Dolores Umbridge. Curiously, Sajiv Javid and Mark Harper don’t feature.

Having a contest to select the person who will become PM and oversee the next, and arguably most vital stage of Brexit, without going back to the people seems undemocratic. Indeed, as ‘Fleet Street Fox’ provocatively asks puts it, is it right that the fate of UK with respect to Brexit will be decided by “120,000 [the figure is acknowledged to be closer to 160,000] retired colonels and village fete organisers?”

Let’s hope for all the collective sake of the UK that the ongoing horror show that Brexit has become doesn’t become, because of the selection of the next PM by such a statically small proportion of the population, a whole lot worse and start to resemble a disaster movie.